

Phelps House
329 Divisadero Street
San Francisco, San Francisco County
California

/ HABS No. CAL-1904

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
450 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, California

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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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PHELPS HOUSE

San Francisco, San Francisco County, California

ADDRESS: 329 Divisadero Street
OWNER: Charles L. Ayers, Jr.
OCCUPANT: Mr. David Finn
USE: Residence

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Phelps House represents an exotic intrusion into the simple early traditions of the city and is often referred to as the oldest frame house in San Francisco. Its Louisiana oriented (and it came from that area originally) form provides a rare instance of the central halled house with important veranda and second story balcony, all raised on a high foundation in the manner of the Acadian and Louisiana cottages of the 18th and early 19th century. The addition of fashion oriented slender Tuscan columns or pillars on the first main floor (Classical Revival) and a barge or verge board on the second (Gothic Revival) suggests the desire to produce a vernacular Louisiana house with contemporary ornamental touches.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Phelps house is often referred to as the oldest frame residence in San Francisco. The exactness of this claim is uncertain, as there are a few other houses of the same general period, about which precise dates of origin are unknown. Indeed, the Phelps House itself is not easily pinned down to one definite year, yet alone a part of the year-- in this crucial early phase of San Francisco's architectural history.

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It is generally thought to date from 1850, and is generally thought to have come from New Orleans around the "Horn"--in sections. It is certain that Abner Phelps and his large family occupied the house during his and his childrens' lifetime; but just when they first occupied it is uncertain.

Abner Phelps, Sr., was born in Vermont and graduated from West Point. He became a Colonel in the Mexican War. He probably came to California in 1849¹. Settling in San Francisco, he turned to the law, and occupied offices in the Montgomery Block when it was completed (1852 ff.). The oldest account of the history of the house² states that it was built by John Middleton and Sons in 1850, "one of the first real estate concerns in this city", out of lumber "framed in sections brought round the "Horn" from Maine".³ This seems less reasonable than the account that it was shipped in sections from New Orleans, after being dismantled there. The Phelps House is a type such as might have been found in New Orleans, although its Gothic Revival style and wood construction suggest Eastern sources also.⁴

The house was set on a one hundred and sixty acre plot at the foot of Buena Vista Hill.⁵ Old watercolor views⁶ show it isolated in a then remote setting west of the small town of San Francisco. Its relationship to the growing city of San Francisco was not so felicitous. It was soon surrounded by the rapid developments in the Western Addition. During this period, six children were born to the Phelps, after the death of their first child at birth. Four sons--Abner Jr., Walter, Louis and George--and two daughters--Mary and Inez--made the large property less lonely. Almost all of them continued to live in the house as it was gradually surrounded by new building. Most of them, with the exception of George, died in the house. They were not a marrying family (with few exceptions) and George was still in the house at the end of the 1930's, after a life span stretching from 1856. His death in a hospital at eighty four, during August 1940, left the property to a grand-niece, Shirley Robison (later Mrs. Victor Rosenstein); she sold the house, through the California Bank, to Charles L. Ayers, Jr. He was a descendant of Humphrey Ayers of Boston (an old friend of Abner Phelps) who was said to have come to San Francisco in 1852. Mr. Ayers still owns the house (October 1963), although he is now of a venerable age.⁷

The children of Abner Phelps moved the house from its site facing east, on the west side of Divisadero Street, to a site farther west on the then much reduced lot, facing south. (A building on the street contained a

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large hall on the second floor with stores below, built as an investment by the Phelps family--probably about 1910, judging by its style). The house is currently leased to Mr. David Finn who has done much to repair it and prolong its life. As a lessee, he is unable to make major structural repairs which are long overdue.

NOTES (Historical Information)

1. San Francisco Chronicle, August 8, 1934; also Millie Robbins' columns relating to the house tour sponsored by the California Heritage Council in November of 1961--with facts progressively corrected as columns advance in date. (also San Francisco Chronicle)
2. San Francisco Chronicle, August 8, 1934.
3. Eleanor Preston Watkins, The Builders of San Francisco, p. 23, says: "the lumber was already cut, but the house was not in sections." An old panoramic photograph (ca. 1850 or 1851), at the California Historical Society, shows the house with its left side and main front gable only, possibly during construction.
4. Mrs. Victor E. Rosenstein, the former Shirley Phelps Robison, corresponded with Mrs. Millie Robbins (note 1) and stated that the house had been brought from New Orleans in 1850 to make the new bride of Abner Phelps, Augusta Roussell of New Orleans, less homesick. Other sources say she came in 1852; there was twenty two years difference in her and her husband's ages.
5. San Francisco News, December 27, 1940, states that Phelps "bought a squatter's claim to over 100 acres at the foot of Buena Vista Hill. There were two approaches to the home...an old dirt road winding through hills from Mission Dolores out to the Presidio, and the other through Hayes Valley...to San Francisco...the dirt road...is now Divisadero Street.
6. Owned by Mrs. Victor E. Rosenstein of Burlingame, California.
7. The Dr. Thomas Ayers, often mentioned as an owner also, was Charles L. Ayers, Jr.'s brother.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

Books:

- Baird, Joseph A., Jr., Time's Wondrous Changes: San Francisco Architecture, 1776-1915, San Francisco, California Historical Society, 1962, p. 16.
- Benet, James, San Francisco and the Bay Region, New York, Random House, 1963, p. 163.
- Watkins, Eleanor Preston, The Builders of San Francisco, And Some of Their Early Homes, San Francisco, Colonial Dames, 1935, p. 23.

Interviews:

Interview with David Finn, July, 1963.

Newspapers and Periodicals:

- San Francisco Bulletin, October 14, 1924, p. 8, column 1 (mood piece).
- San Francisco Chronicle, August 8, 1934 (photos of "yesterday & today").
- San Francisco Chronicle, November 13, 14, 1961 (Millie Robbins' column).
- San Francisco Chronicle, November 19, 1961 (Sunday Bonanza Section).
- San Francisco Chronicle, November 20, 1961 (millie Robbins' column).
- San Francisco News, December 27, 1940, p. 20.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

EXTERIOR

As a house type, the Phelps House is unusual in many respects. The raising of the main living floor above the ground, with a high flight of steps (ten in number here), is not traditionally New England or Eastern. Nor is the general massing of the house typical of Classical Revival or Gothic Revival houses of the East--which resemblance its date might suggest. It is obviously a Southern, and specifically a

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New Orleans type of building--that is, a southern form derived from a French Canadian 18th century type. "Mother John's Legacy" is its spiritual prototype in New Orleans, which, in turn, is based on an Acadian or French Canadian house type still commonly seen in both Quebec and Louisiana. The plan is distinctly Baroque (in the United States it would be called Georgian). A central hall divides the principal living and dining room in the front, with a room and kitchen at the back on either side of the same hall. The raised main floor is partly a formal convention in Acadian houses which became a functional convention in Louisiana where flood damage was a potential and constant threat. The new location of this transferred house is obviously unrelated to such a threat--in the western wilds of San Francisco of the early 1850's. To the premise of the Louisiana 18th century raised cottage in wood, with a large front veranda, has been added the fashionable trim of the Gothic. The second main floor is basically a half-floor, half-roof, with high dormer doors in the French manner opening onto a second story balcony which runs continuously across the front (both veranda and balcony have sturdy turned wood balustrades). The side dormers (two on each side) are simple gabled forms, although with a sharpness of form suggestive of Gothic spikiness. The central, or major, opening from the interior is roofed with a much larger gable, rather than a dormer. This gable has a simplified barge or verge board in a more obviously Gothic Revival manner. It is interesting that the tall pillars on the first main floor's veranda are Tuscan; here the last gasp of Classical Revival peers into a Gothic future. The principal roof is a simple gable, and above it rise twin chimneys--serving fireplaces in the middle of the living and dining room, and the back rooms as well. This rigidly symmetrical plan of rooms and chimneys around a central hall, despite the vestiges of Classical Revival and Gothic fashions, relates the house to its 18th century background. It seemed almost as isolated in its new San Francisco setting, as some of the Cajun cottages appear today on the River Road, north of New Orleans.

Technically, the house is framed of wood and covered with horizontal lapped siding, now painted white. All of the windows on the front are French doors. Those on the first main floor have six panes of glass divided by slender muntins, in each leaf, above a paneled wood base; those on the second main floor are entirely of glass--with three larger panes in each leaf. The front door is a single leaf, with an octagonal-oid window above a "squeezed" octagonal paneled wood base. The foundations need work, as do the sagging wood veranda and balcony.

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INTERIOR

The first floor has approximately nine foot ceilings, with two and one-half inch boards forming the visible ceiling of the rooms. The walls of living and dining room are plastered and painted. The fireplace with its rosewood and marble mantel in the living room (vandalized) is much simplified; the fireplace in the dining room is now completely covered up. In the hall, a seven foot wood wainscot, made up of alternating three and one-half and nine and one-half inch boards, provides more formal architectural treatment of the walls. On the left of this hall, two-thirds of the way back, a paneled wood door (rectilinear paneling paired above squared paneling) leads down a wood stair to the basement; farther to the rear, a similar door is set at the foot of the stairs which parallel the basement steps, but lead to the second floor. This door provides entry to what is now a study-library. The kitchen across the hall at the rear of the house has been somewhat modified, although not radically. Double-hung windows made up of six panes are used throughout the first floor at sides and rear (replacing the French doors of the front). The floor is five and one-half inch soft wood planking, possibly salvaged from a ship or ships. (It is particularly rough on the second floor.)

The second floor plan was originally different from its present appearance. At the top of the stair from the first floor was a small subordinate hall, at right angles to the main hall (paralleling that below). This subordinate hall leads on the left side of the house (now the west side) to two chambers, that in the front larger than that in the rear. A transverse passage, also at right angles to the main second floor hall, led off on the other side (now the east); it provided access to two small chambers in the right (east) front of the house. This is now a closet, and the original partition between the two small chambers has been removed to make one larger front room on this side. A medium sized chamber occupies the rear of the present east side; and a more recent bath is located at the back of the central hall. Steep gable shapes make the rooms here somewhat constricted, although the high French doors of the front provide pleasant opening up of this peaked interior space. The decor represents the taste of the present lessee, Mr. David Finn, who has done much to make the house attractive and livable. Electrical wiring was installed ca. 1910; it has been only slightly modified since then.

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SITE

The Phelps House originally was oriented north and south, facing east on Divisadero Street. After 1906, it was moved back on the lot and turned to face south; a narrow corridor in the row of stores (No. 329) provides access from the street at present. (Left and right in this report refer to these directions as viewed from in front of the present south front of the house).

Prepared by,

Joseph A. Baird Jr.

Joseph A. Baird, Jr., PHD
University of California

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APPROVED:

Charles S. Pope

DATE: *November 1964*

Charles S. Pope, AIA
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures
Western Office, Design and Construction
National Park Service